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ABSTRACT

A support service for students at Wayne State College is described that is coordinated by the learning center and supported by a network of referrals. The target groups are students who have been placed on academic suspension or probation, the chronically absent, and those who are having difficulty with basic writing, term paper writing, test taking, note taking, reading comprehension, and other academic skills. After a student seeks help or has been referred to the Early Alert Program, contact is made with the student's academic advisor. If the student decides not to pursue the initial appointment at the learning center, the referral is concluded; the student at least is aware of the services available. For students who pursue contact with the center, a private meeting with the center director provides the opportunity to discuss the student's expectations, academic preparation, adjustment to college, and academic difficulties. The director then makes a referral to the appropriate source of assistance for the student. Of the students contacted each semester, about 60 percent seek help through the Early Alert Program. Types of services that are appropriate for different student problems are identified. Appendices include a flow chart of the referral process and sample referral and recordkeeping forms. (SW)

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# EARLY ALERT: REACHING STUDENTS IN TIME

by

Barbara T. Lupack

Most colleges and universities have a variety of tutorial and remedial programs available. But often there is difficulty in identifying the students who need assistance. Usually there is the added difficulty of identifying those students early enough in the semester to help them. A possible solution to the problem of identification is the implementation of an Early Alert Program.

The program at Wayne State, a small state college in northeast Nebraska with an enrollment of 2000+ students, was developed in the spring of 1980. The success of this program coordinated by the Learning Center depended on the creation and implementation of a strong network of referrals through which students could receive almost immediate attention and assistance. Referral sources included Learning Center Faculty, Student Tutors, Academic Advisors, the Personal Counselor, the Academic Counselor, the Career Planning Counselor, and the Assistant Dean of Students. Students facing or returning from academic suspension or probation were the initial target group. But that group soon expanded to include students who were chronically absent (4-5 unexcused absences) from class or who were experiencing academic difficulty (with basic writing, term paper writing, test-taking, notetaking, reading comprehension, etc.). Since Wayne State has an open admission policy, students with such

problems were numerous indeed.

Participation in the Early Alert Program could occur in one of two ways. Acting on their own initiative, students could come to the Learning Center when they perceived possible weaknesses in their skills. Or they could come as a result of a referral from a concerned faculty or staff member (including Dorm Directors and Resident Assistants). Referral forms were distributed early in the semester to all teaching faculty and support staff; frequent meetings between the Learning Center Director and instructors in all academic divisions helped to encourage early detection of students' academic problems.

Once a referral was made to the Learning Center, the following process would begin. The student referred would be contacted, first by mail and then later by a follow-up telephone call, and invited to come for an appointment in the Learning Center. (The mailing included a brochure explaining the Early Alert Program, a list of student tutors' names and addresses, and a schedule of workshops and other Center services.) At the same time, the student's academic advisor would be notified and apprised of his advisee's difficulty in a particular class or classes. The advisor could choose to act upon the information, thus reinforcing the importance of the referral, or simply to keep the information until his next conference with the student, which usually occurred before registration at midsemester. Either way, this information became a significant tool in the advising process.

If the student decided <u>not</u> to make and keep the initial appointment in the Learning Center, that referral would be concluded;

he would not be contacted further. Yet, even at this stage, progress would already have been made. The student would have become aware that his instructor had noted and was concerned about his academic difficulty and that services were available to help. He would also have gained information about workshops on campus to assist him in skill-building and about tutorial services. Such materials would be in his possession, and he might decide to utilize some of the services later in the semester. So even a referral which proceeded no further than the initial contact had already served an important function.

If the student did decide to make and keep the appointment, he would then meet privately with the Learning Center Director. The Director and student would talk--usually first about the student's expectations, goals, high school background, academic preparation for college, adjustment to college life, and later about the specific academic difficulty. Based on the student's particular need, the Director would make a referral. The Director would, in the student's presence, contact the appropriate person by telephone, discuss generally the nature of the referral, and allow the student to get on the line and make an appointment at his convenience. The Director would later contact the referral person to determine whether the appointment was kept and if progress had been made. All information would be recorded; any progress would be reported to the advisor as well.

The actual referrals varied. Many were directly to Learning Center classes or workshops. Non-traditional students, for example, often lacked confidence in their own ability to pursue college-level

work and needed the group support gained by attending a workshop on "Survival Skills for Returning Students." Entering freshmen who were terrified by the prospect of essay exams were aided by workshops on "Test-taking Tips" and "Test Anxiety." Students whose high school preparation was weak need elective basic skills courses, provided for credit by the Learning Center; these courses included Basic Writing, Writing Improvement, Report Writing, Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary Development, Spelling Improvement, and Grammar and Punctuation Review. Particularly effective were two eight-week mini-courses which met twice a week. "Academic Skills," taught during the first half of each semester, was especially helpful to non-traditional or returning students as well as to entering freshmen. Advisors were urged to recommend this course to their advisees who graduated in the lower rankings of their high school classes. "Improving Midterm Grades," which began after midsemester downslips had been issued, aided students in potential academic difficulty in raising their averages by increasing reading, report-writing, and test-taking skills.

Often depression, loneliness, roommate tensions, dating problems, pregnancy, drug or alcohol dependence were causes of absence from classes or of other academic problems; the Personal Counselor was of paramount importance in providing counseling and acting as a liaison with qualified medical personnel. Sometimes students found themselves in courses too advanced for them; here the Academic Counselor could help by explaining drop and add options or by reassigning advisors. Still other students were bored by classroom material which was too basic; the Assistant Dean of Students was able to inform them about CLEP testing. Those unsure of majors or career choices were frequently

referred to the Career Planning Counselor to explore alternatives.

So while the Early Alert Program provided relatively few new services, it was able to initiate an effective referral network, to prevent much duplication of effort, and, above all, when necessary, to give almost immediate services and information.

Results of the program have been gratifying. An average of 1400 students are contacted each semester; about 60% follow-up and seek assistance through the Early Alert services. Attrition/Retention studies done each semester on ten randomly selected students who did participate actively in the program show that over 95% feel that their grade point averages have improved or that their adjustment to college life has been facilitated as a result.

Although Early Alert is an intrusive program, few students seem to resent it. This is probably due to the fact that they are not pressured to participate; after the initial mail and phone contacts, participation is by their choice. However, many are grateful for the individualized attention they receive through the program. Students, instructors, and advisors alike appreciate an "early warning" opportunity. The greatest benefit of the program is to the sincere student who wants to improve yet is uncertain of how to go about finding the help he needs. A second and almost equally important benefit is the recognition by faculty advisors and instructors of the importance of basic skills training and the advantage of working together to serve students.

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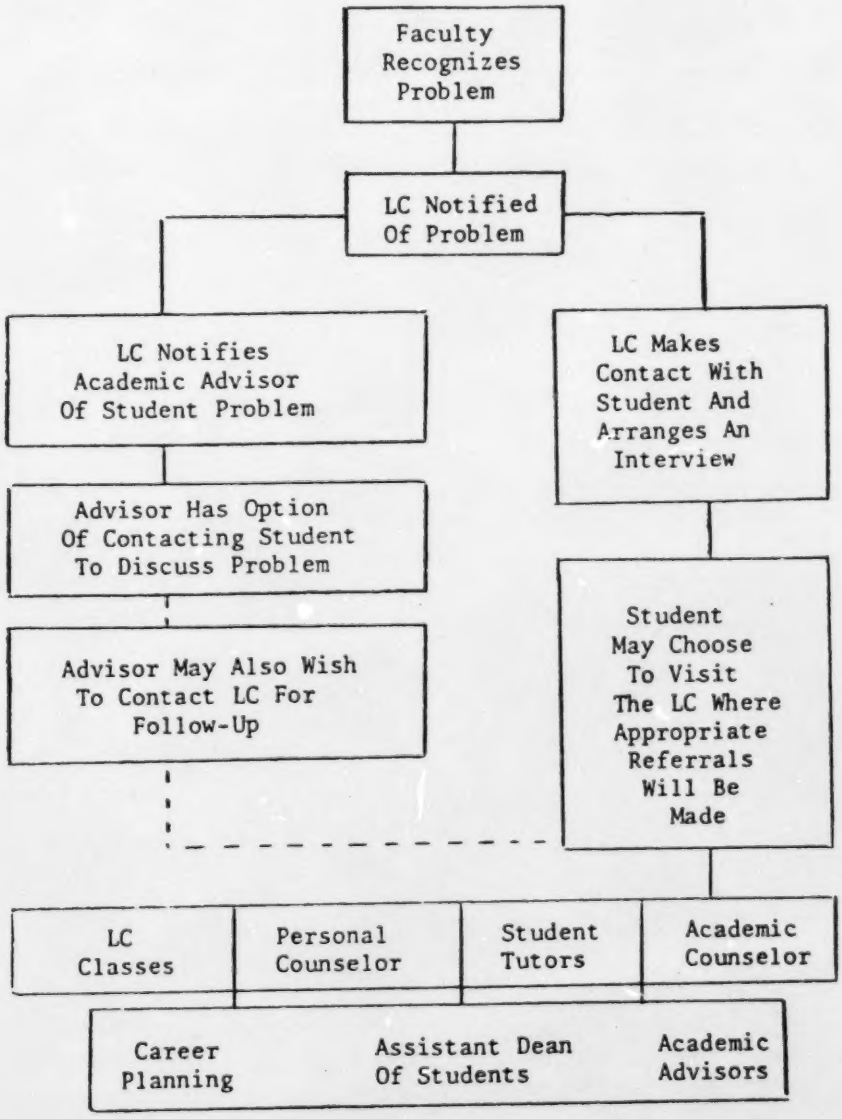
## REFERRAL PROCESS


Faculty Recognizes Problem
LC Notified Of Problem
LC Notifies Academic Advisor Of Student Problem
Advisor Has Option Of Contacting Student To Discuss Problem
Advisor May Also Wish To Contact LC For Follow-Up
LC Makes Contact With Student And Arranges An Interview
Student May Choose To Visit The LC Where Appropriate Referrals Will Be Made
LC Classes
Personal Counselor
Student Tutors
Academic Counselor
Career Planning
Assistant Dean Of Students
Academic Advisors

EARLY ALERT PROGRAM: RECORD-KEEPING

*(Record card developed by Ms. Donna Bliss, Director of Counseling, Wayne State College, and adapted for Early Alert Program use by Dr. Bobbye Lupack, Director of the Learning Center/Tutor Program, Wayne State College)*

EARLY ALERT PROGRAM

82-83

NAME_____

Campus Address_____Phone_____

Home Address_____

Home Phone_____

Parents' Names_____

Class: FR SO JR SR GR TR Sex: M F

Original Referral Source_____

Date First Session_____

Date Last Session_____Total Sessions_____

Major_____Advisor_____

H LI HR

REFERRALS/RECOMMENDATIONS:

FOLLOW-UP:

EARLY ALERT REFERRAL

STUDENT'S NAME _____

FACULTY MEMBER MAKING REFERRAL _____

DATE _____

COURSE / SECTION _____

REASON FOR REFERRAL

EXCESSIVE ABSENCE _____ NUMBER TO DATE _____

LOW TEST SCORES _____

POOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS (WRITTEN / ORAL) _____

OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY) _____

_____

COMMENTS OR RECOMMENDATIONS _____

_____

_____

_____

DOES THE STUDENT KNOW THAT YOU ARE MAKING THIS REFERRAL?

YES _____ NO _____

*Please return to Dr. B. Lupack, Director, Learning Center/Tutors.*
*Thank you for your support of the Early Alert Program.*